

# Voice for education

After following the advice he gave to others, Mares decides to call it a legislative career

By **TERESA STAHL**

It's only fitting that Rep. Harry Mares (R-White Bear Lake) has chosen to end his legislative tenure after eight years.

"That's as long as a president can serve and that's enough for me in the House of Representatives," he said.

Quizzing members with presidential trivia is a common way Mares begins meetings of the House Education Policy Committee, which he serves as chair.

"The presidency is very sacred to me," he said. "A civilian is in charge of a democracy with a very strong military. ... It is an art to maintain the power of the people."

Mares can be as funny as he can be serious, and is well known for telling Minnesota Vikings jokes. Humor has always been a part of this Wisconsin native's life: Mares' two older brothers are named Tom and Dick.

"My father was a jokester," he said. "We've had a lot of laughs over that."

The husband, father of seven, and social studies teacher of 36 years has a love of humor, history, and government.

Mares' steady climb in public office to state representative started as a volunteer for the White Bear Lake Planning Commission.

From there he served on the northern suburb's city council and then was elected mayor. One month into his second mayoral term the state representative of his district encouraged Mares to run for the seat. And so, in January 1995, he began his first term in the House of Representatives.

Mares said his strong belief in democracy drew him to the Legislature.

"We're citizen legislators, we're not professionals," he said. "I love the compromising it takes to make a democracy work, because that's all our government is — a bundle of compromises. I like the idea of negotiating, compromising, working together."

In education, where Mares holds one of the most powerful positions in the state, he said he tries not to let partisan politics enter the discussion.

"I want to keep issues nonpartisan as much

as possible because I think that's important to education," he said.

He also tries to limit tension in the room during meetings of his committee, according to Rep. Lyndon Carlson (DFL-Crystal), DFL lead for the committee.

"When you're running a large committee,

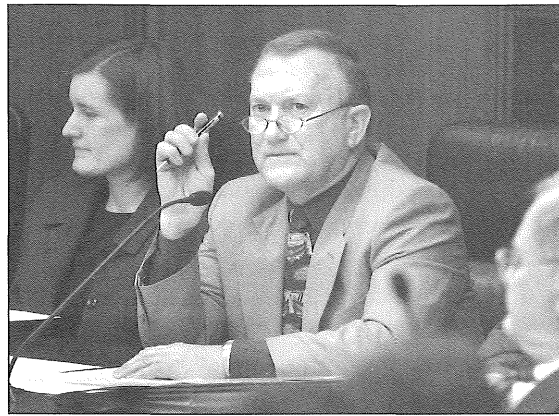


PHOTO BY ANDREW VON BANK

Rep. Harry Mares, who is stepping down after eight years in the House, chairs the House Education Policy Committee. He was appointed chair prior to the 1999 legislative session.

you're bound to have some difficulties that arise. When people feel strongly on an issue, sometimes using humor is a good way to resolve what could potentially be a conflict," Carlson said. "Harry was good at that."

Rep. Alice Seagren (R-Bloomington) agreed. Seagren, chair of the House K-12 Education Finance Committee, said Mares is a strong voice for education.

"He exemplifies the best there is in teaching and the teacher," she said. "They can be proud of his service for them."

Seagren has worked alongside Mares for the eight years he's served. She said they share similar philosophical beliefs and personal experiences. Both have children with serious illnesses — Mares' youngest child has Cystic Fibrosis.

"We share the ups and downs of children with physical limitations," she said. "He's just been a best buddy to me."

Mares' wife and children are a big reason for his retirement.

"Campaigning is very difficult, very time consuming, and has a profound effect on family," he said. Particularly, he wants to spend more time with his wife, he said.

The laws he has introduced aren't what Mares said he wants to be remembered for.

"I've never thought about what's most important and what isn't, because almost every bill I've brought forth affected someone's life," he said. "I just tried to make good policy."


"I would hope people would remember me as trustworthy. My word is good when I give it."

Mares said serving as a state representative has made him a more mature person.

"I probably discovered who I was in greater depth than ever before. I discovered abilities I never recognized — now some won't call them abilities," he said, grinning. "But I became aware of them more so by doing this than I ever dreamt I would."

"I always told my students that unless you take risks in life I don't think you really grow. One's whole life is a process of growth. In my eight years here I think I've grown where at first I felt very uneasy, but now I feel an integral part of the legislative process. In every office (I served), every classroom I walked into, I didn't know what the results would be."

Seagren, becoming teary-eyed at the thought of Mares' absence, said she will most remember his integrity and wisdom.

"It's been an honor to work with him and I'm going to miss him a lot." 

## STEPPING DOWN

**Rep. Harry Mares**

**Republican**

**District 55A – White Bear Lake**

**Terms: 4**

**Career notes:** In 1999, Mares was named chair of the House Education Policy Committee when Republicans gained the majority. He also sponsored a number of pension and retirement benefit bills, having served on the joint House-Senate pensions commission. In 2000, Mares sponsored the law making the monarch butterfly the 13th state symbol, after elementary school students from his district brought him the idea.